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ABSTRACT

In an effort to refute the claim that minority group parents do not value higher education as highly as other parents, this study surveyed 1,015 adults in the general public, as well as Hispanic (n=202), African American (n=202), and white (n=201) parents of high school students. Opinions centered around the following: (1) higher education is generally perceived as extremely important, especially to parents of high school students, and African American and Hispanic parents give education a higher priority than do white parents; (2) the process of earning a degree is inherently valuable and is not merely a symbolic, largely meaningless exercise; (3) the public tends to emphasize the individual responsibility of college students in areas such as remediation and financial matters, but feels that schools should assist students who are legitimately having difficulties; (4) paying for college is difficult, especially for the poor, but most people believe that anyone who really wants a college education can get one; and (5) although a majority of respondents believe higher education is delivering a valuable service, they are largely unfamiliar with details of higher education administration and financing often debated by the nation's leaders. Appended are data tables of survey results and information on the methodology. (Contains 11 endnotes.) (RAB)

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education

By John Immerwahr
With Tony Foleno

A Report by Public Agenda

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Contents

Foreword by Patrick M. Callan and Robert Zemsky ..... *v*
Executive Summary ..... *vii*
Acknowledgments ..... *ix*
Introduction ..... *x*

Finding One: Higher Education, More Important than Ever 1
Finding Two: More than a Piece of Paper 9
Finding Three: The Responsibility Rests with the Student,
But Institutions Should Help Those Who Help Themselves 15
Finding Four: Paying for College Is Difficult but Doable 21
Finding Five: High Satisfaction, Low Familiarity—
In Contrast with Leaders 26

Afterword by Deborah Wadsworth 33
Supporting Tables 37
Endnotes 45
Methodology 47
About the Author 48
Public Agenda 49
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 50
Consortium for Policy Research in Education 52
National Center for Postsecondary Improvement 52

Foreword

Great Expectations is the most recent and ambitious survey that the Public Agenda organization has conducted to probe the public's attitudes and opinions about higher education. Its authors, John Immerwahr and Tony Foleno, have our congratulations on a masterful job. We are particularly impressed with their use of information from earlier and related surveys to interpret the results of this, the third of a series of three aimed at stimulating public discourse about the role of colleges and universities in maintaining and enhancing the opportunities for all Americans to participate fully in our society.*

This survey is unique in selectively oversampling to reach a group most interested in higher education: parents of high school students. Slightly over 1,000 respondents were drawn from the general public. In addition, the survey oversampled 201 white parents, 202 African American parents and 202 Hispanic parents in order to be able to distinguish these parents' views about higher education from each other. As a result of the findings made possible by this oversampling, *Great Expectations* will, we believe, lay to rest the myth that parents within minority groups do not value higher education as highly as the general public.

The survey results should encourage friends of higher education. Eighty-seven percent of Americans believe that a college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be. And there is virtual unanimity (93%) that the price of higher education should not prevent qualified and motivated students from going to college. It is less encouraging, however, to learn that the high marks that the public gives to higher education are not founded on familiarity with it, and that people are much more concerned about the environment, health care, care for the elderly, and the public schools than they are about higher education. Deborah Wadsworth's thoughtful afterword to this report warns of the possible dangers of this lack of awareness and concern, and we urge that it not be overlooked.

"Great Expectations" will, we believe, lay to rest the myth that parents within minority groups do not value higher education as highly as the general public.

We must express our appreciation of the time and assistance given the project by the members of the project's advisory committee: Alfredo G. de los Santos, Jr., Wallace D. Loh, Diana S. Natalicio, and Virginia B. Smith. We appreciate the thoughtful contributions of William Doyle, who directed the

* *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (San Jose: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, 1998) and *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (San Jose: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, 1999).

project at the National Center. And we are grateful to those whose financial support made the survey possible: The Ford Foundation, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement. Although the results are not reflected in this report, seven individual state reports will also be published thanks to support for oversampling by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (for Colorado, Florida and Pennsylvania), by The James Irvine Foundation (for California), by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (for Illinois), by New York University (for New York State), and by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (for North Carolina).

Patrick M. Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education

Robert Zemsky
Professor and Director
Institute for Research
on Higher Education

Executive Summary

FINDING ONE

Higher Education, More Important than Ever

Higher education is perceived as extremely important, and for most people a college education has become the necessary admission ticket to good jobs and a middle-class lifestyle. Parents of high school students place especially high importance on a college education, and African American and Hispanic parents give college an even higher priority than do white parents. All groups believe that the country should ensure that no qualified and motivated student is excluded from a college education because of the cost.

FINDING TWO

More Than a Piece of Paper

To the public, getting a higher education is much more than putting in time and walking away with a sheepskin—the public holds a long list of expectations for higher education institutions. Colleges should help students develop maturity, organizational skills and an ability to get along with others, and should provide specific skills, such as problem-solving and communication. People also have high expectations for the institutions themselves. They want institutions to keep the costs down, but they also want to ensure quality by hiring good teachers and holding students to high standards.

FINDING THREE

The Responsibility Rests with the Student,
But Institutions Should Help Those Who Help Themselves

The public, in contrast to how it views K–12 education, tends to emphasize the responsibility of college students, but this does not mean that they exempt higher education institutions from any responsibility. This attitude is manifested in areas such as remediation and financial aid. The public expects schools to help students who are having trouble, but the initiative should come from individuals.

FINDING FOUR

Paying for College Is Difficult but Doable

Despite the often-heard complaints about the high cost of higher education, most people believe that anyone who really wants a college education can get one. Parents say that they are worried about paying for their own children's

education, but they also say that they are confident that their children will go to college and that they will work out a way to pay for it. Most people agree that people from low-income families have a more difficult time than others.

FINDING FIVE

High Satisfaction, Low Familiarity—In Contrast with Leaders

The majority of the public believes that higher education is delivering a valuable service and that a college education is available to anyone who really wants one. At least for the moment, the public is satisfied with the nation's higher education, and people are much more likely to focus their attention on other issues that they perceive as more problematic. For a variety of reasons, most Americans do not know a great deal about the details of higher education administration and financing, and have not yet taken a position on some of the questions and debates about higher education that have engaged the nation's leaders.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals contributed to the production of this report. I am, first of all, deeply indebted to the staff of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, especially Pat Callan, Joni Finney and Will Doyle. Their advice, knowledge and friendship have been of enormous help in this and all of our previous projects. I have appreciated their willingness to understand the public's perspective, regardless of whether or not it supports their own institutional positions.

I am equally grateful to my colleagues and associates at Public Agenda: Steve Farkas and Tony Foleno designed and supervised the survey research for the project, with valuable assistance from Ann Duffett, Patrick Foley and Jordan Elias. Jean Johnson and Deborah Wadsworth provided wise counsel and direction for every step of the project.

I would also like to thank the experts on the National Center's Advisory Committee, who spoke with us at different stages during this project. These members are: Alfredo G. de los Santos, Jr., former Vice Chancellor of Educational Development, Maricopa Community Colleges, Tempe, Arizona; Wallace D. Loh, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Seattle University; Diana S. Natalicio, President, University of Texas at El Paso; and Virginia B. Smith, President Emerita, Vassar College.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Villanova University for providing the support and flexibility which made it possible for me to participate in this project.

John Immerwahr

Introduction

It has become clear that in today's booming high-tech economy, higher education has replaced the high school diploma as the gateway to the middle class.

Education has traditionally been seen as an essential component of both individual and social well-being. Ahigh school diploma was the admission ticket to a good job and a middle-class lifestyle for an individual, and America's strong education system was usually credited as a major driver of economic vitality.

In our conversations and surveys with Americans from all parts of the country, it has become clear that in today's booming high-tech economy, higher education has replaced the high school diploma as the gateway to the middle class. Higher education is increasingly seen as essential for economic mobility, and the focus is not just on the credential but on the personal growth, skills and perspective that students take away from a college education. At the same time, people see a highly educated population as necessary for both economic prosperity and social well-being.

The greater importance of higher education has also raised debates among leaders about how to pay for higher education; new modes of delivering higher education; remediation; how to serve nontraditional students; and affirmative action. Whereas past surveys of the general public have concentrated on more basic questions, such as how families will pay for the higher education of their children, this study explores the public's viewpoint in more detail, examining such issues as: What does the public expect higher education institutions to deliver? What responsibilities does the public assign to students, and to higher education institutions? Is the public concerned about access to higher education? How does the public's viewpoint differ from the concerns of leaders?

To examine these issues, Public Agenda, in collaboration with the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Institute for Research on Higher Education, conducted an extensive survey of public attitudes toward higher education. The survey includes 1,015 telephone interviews with members of the general public, plus a special focus on parents: an oversample of 202 Hispanic, 202 African American and 201 white parents of children in high school. Public Agenda designed this survey after consulting with experts in higher education policy and conducting a series of eight focus groups around the country. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with a number of those who had been contacted in the original survey. (See Methodology for details.)

In addition, we conducted parallel surveys in seven states (500 respondents per state): California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. We also had the advantage of being able to refer to two smaller-scale national surveys (one in 1993 and one in early 1998), as well as to a comprehensive study of leadership attitudes about higher education, which was published in 1999. Taken together, these studies represent one of the most comprehensive examinations of public opinion on higher education ever conducted.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that regularly reports on public attitudes on major policy issues. The research was sponsored by: the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes public policies enhancing Americans' opportunities for education and training beyond high school; the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, which conducts research and publishes reports on a wide variety of education issues; and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, which conducts research that identifies and analyzes the challenges facing postsecondary education.

For the purposes of this research, we define *higher education* broadly. Unless otherwise specified in the text, higher education includes all education and training beyond high school, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions.

Findings from this research are presented in this report, which is divided into five main sections. *Great Expectations* will be distributed nationwide to public policymakers, business leaders, educators, and others interested in higher education policy. An online version, providing a summary of the findings, is available on the web sites of Public Agenda (http://www.publicagenda.org) and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (http://www.highereducation.org).

FINDING ONE

Higher Education, More Important than Ever

Higher education is perceived as extremely important, and for most people a college education has become the necessary admission ticket to good jobs and a middle-class lifestyle. Parents of high school students place especially high importance on a college education, and African American and Hispanic parents give college an even higher priority than do white parents. All groups believe that the country should ensure that no qualified and motivated student is excluded from a college education because of the cost.

"Today You Don't Even Question Whether You Are Going to College."

Higher education has taken on enormous importance for many Americans. Several in our focus groups reflected on the difference a college education—or the lack of one—had made in their own lives, while others spoke of the impact of higher education on the lives of their children.

> *My husband did not go to college. He works for SEPTA[the local transit authority] and he has advanced in salary and promotions along the way, but he has always said he would have made so much more money if he did have his college degree.*
>
> *—Woman, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

> *I see my son learning more socially, and growing in ways I never would have imagined, and I don't think that would have happened if he had gone into the workforce.*
>
> *—Man, Santa Clara, California*

"Today you don't even question whether you are going to college."

The survey results, based on interviews with more than 1,400 Americans, document the public's perception that a college education is essential for anyone who wants to have a successful life in contemporary America. Seventy-seven percent say that getting a college education is more important than it was 10 years ago and a towering 87% agree that a college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be. As a woman in our focus group in Old Bridge, New Jersey, said:

> *Today you don't even question whether you are going to college. It's the sign of the times. When I was growing up what was important was to make the home front, with marriage and children, but today it is college.*

When people talk about higher education, they usually mention first the need for a college education as a necessary prerequisite for finding a good job. It is clear, however, that people aren't just thinking about a first job; instead they seem to be thinking about the long term as well. Several of our respondents spontaneously expressed concern that young people might be shortchanging themselves by taking high-paying jobs without getting the education they will need for the rest of their lives.

> *Where I work, if someone knows Java and some other languages, we will hire them even if they haven't been to college. But I wonder in a few years, will there be a time when that will change and we will let them go?*
>
> *—Woman, Santa Clara, California*

> *Thirty years ago if you had your high school diploma, the work culture was that you got into a company and worked your way up and retired. In today's economy, you don't last that long. You need a college education if you're going to rise in the companies; if you're going to last for a long time, you gotta have your degree.*
>
> *—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

A college education topped the list of responses when we asked people to choose the one thing that can most help a person succeed in the world today.

Traditionally, Americans have seen higher education as only one of many factors that are important for success. Other studies have found that when respondents are asked to select the most important quality for success, they rate things such as hard work ahead of a college education.[1] In our survey, however, a college education topped the list of responses when we asked people to choose the one thing that can most help a person succeed in the world today. The largest percentage (35%) chose a college education; this response scored higher than other compelling factors, such as knowing how to get along with people (30%) and having a good work ethic (26%). (See Table 3.)

Our respondents were by no means trapped by the stereotypical perception that higher education is only for 18-year-olds. They know that people of all ages enroll in higher education, and many spoke with pride of their own achievements as adult learners (and even of the achievements of their parents). As the following focus group comments suggest, however, when people think of higher education, they are most concerned with what happens to recent high school graduates.

When I think of an older person going back to school—my mother started college as a mature woman—I think of people who already have a job and are either doing it for their own self-image, or they're looking for a promotion in their job. I generally think of the high school student as needing the college diploma to get a job, whereas the older person who has gone back probably already has a job, but may be looking for something better.

—Woman, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I think the six years after high school are the most important years of your life as far as determining your adulthood and what is going to happen down the line.

—Man, Santa Clara, California

The Perspective of Parents

Because of the perceived importance of higher education for recent high school graduates, we conducted focus groups specifically with parents and additional interviews with parents of high school students. Parents are convinced that college is a vital experience for their children. As Table 1 shows, 62% of parents of high school students say that a college education is absolutely necessary for their own children, and another 35% describe a college education as helpful but not absolutely necessary. Only a minuscule 3% say that a college education is not that important.

Table 1

When it comes to your own child, do you think a college education is something absolutely necessary to get, something helpful but not necessary, or not that important?

Absolutely necessary	62%
Helpful but not absolutely necessary	35
Not that important	3
Don't know	–

n = 200 parents of high school students

The market demands it. Before you could get a good job with a high school graduation. Now you need a college degree, a master's, or even a Ph.D. The future market is going to be asking for that.

—Woman, Old Bridge, New Jersey

When parents think about their children's future, they see a college education as vital to their children's success, and when they say they want a college education for their children, they most frequently mean an education in a four-year college. Speaking about their oldest child in high school, fully 77% of parents feel that a college education would be the best thing for that child, with 55% hoping for a four-year college experience and another 22% thinking that a community college would be best. Only 16% say that it would be best for their child to go to trade school (see Table 2).

Parents' preference for a college education for their children, rather than trade school, complements their view of college not just as the ticket to a good income but also as an entry to higher standing and social status. In focus groups, people frequently commented that there are not enough people who are learning well-paying trades such as plumbing, and they spoke favorably of the need for more trade schools. When we asked parents of high schoolers what they would recommend to a recent high school graduate from a low-income family who had good grades but low test scores, 47%—a plurality of this group—recommended trade school for such a student, presumably thinking that it would be a ticket to a well-paying job. But, at the same time, trade school is not what most people want for their own children. They want their children not only to have a job with good pay, but also to have the kind of job and social standing that they see as following from a college education.

Table 2

Which of the following do you think would be best for your child after he or she finishes high school?

To go to a four-year college	55%
To go to a two-year community college	22
To go to a trade school	16
To get a job	4
Don't know	3

n = 200 parents of high school students

Even More Important for Minorities

Because Public Agenda conducted additional survey interviews and focus groups with African American and Hispanic parents of high school students, this study affords the unique opportunity to compare the attitudes of these two groups with white parents, as well as with the general public. Ahost of explanations have been offered as to why Hispanic and African American participation rates in higher education are lower than the population as a whole. Some have argued that higher rates of poverty in these groups make access to higher education more difficult; others suggest that predominantly black or Hispanic high schools are less successful in preparing students for college work. It is also sometimes suggested that members of these minority groups, compared to other populations, do not place as high a value on higher education.

The findings from this study seem conclusively to eliminate this last reason. Higher education is important for all Americans, but it is especially important to African American and Hispanic parents, who are significantly more likely to emphasize higher education than either white parents or the population as a whole.

The high value on college education is particularly clear when we ask people how important a college education is for success in later life. As Table 3 demonstrates, Hispanic parents are the most likely to assign high importance to higher education, followed by African American parents and then by white

parents. When we ask the general public which factor is most important for success, no single factor commands majority support. The largest percentage (35%) do say that a college education is most important, but almost equally high percentages opt for other factors, such as knowing how to get along with people (30%) or a good work ethic (26%). But when we turn to the responses of minority parents, a much higher level of commitment emerges, with 65% of Hispanic parents identifying a college education as the most important factor, and 47% of African American parents. The Hispanic response, in other words, is nearly double that of the population in general.

Table 3

If you had to choose the one thing that can most help a young person succeed in the world today, would you say it is:

	General Public	*High School Parents*	*White High School Parents*	*African American High School Parents*	*Hispanic High School Parents*
A college education	35%	35%	33%	47%	65%
Knowing how to get along with people	30	32	29	37	19
A good work ethic	26	23	29	10	10
Work skills learned on the job	5	7	6	5	6
Don't know	3	5	4	3	1

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in table may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

This emphasis on college also surfaced in a focus group with African American parents in Chicago and in another with Hispanic parents in El Paso. The respondents frequently spoke of higher education as the key to economic and social mobility, and as one possible way to overcome the barriers of poverty and prejudice.

> *Why is college important? Because we are black. It is the way that society is set up. We are the underdog already, so if you don't have a college education, it is another thing that is against you.*
>
> *—Woman, Chicago, Illinois*

Afocus group of Hispanic parents in El Paso was particularly engaged by this topic. These parents dispelled the notion that as immigrants, or children of immigrants, they were unaware of the importance of college education in American society. In fact, these parents felt that their families' status as recent immigrants enabled them to recognize the importance of higher education even more clearly. As one father in the group said:

Every time I spoke to [my kids], since they were babies, I said, "After you finish college, then you can start thinking about what you want to do." I think it served me well. It did open doors.

The difference between the views of Hispanic and African American parents versus white parents emerges even more sharply when we ask people whether it is possible to be successful in the workplace without a college education. Most white parents feel that although higher education is important, it is not absolutely necessary. By more than a two-to-one margin (66% to 32%), white parents agree that there are still ways to succeed in American society without a college education. Respondents in focus groups were quick to give examples of jobs where success does not depend on a college education. A man in Philadelphia talked about sales:

Sales requires mostly an ability to sell. If you have an ability to sell you can go anywhere just as if you had a college degree, and you can make an enormous amount of money.

When we interviewed Hispanic and African American parents, however, the picture changes substantially. Hispanic parents take the opposite view from the population in general, with a margin of almost two-to-one (65% to 34%) saying that a college education is, in fact, necessary for success. As Table 4 shows, African American attitudes fall in between the views of the population as a whole and the strong position taken by Hispanic parents.

Table 4

Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?

	General Public	*High School Parents*	*White High School Parents*	*African American High School Parents*	*Hispanic High School Parents*
There are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education	67%	63%	66%	54%	34%
OR					
College education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world	31	36	32	44	65
Don't know	3	2	2	3	2

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in table may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories

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A Gap Between Aspiration and Participation

The emphasis that parents place on higher education becomes even more striking when we compare it to the actual participation rates of the various groups. As Table 5 shows, participation in higher education is lowest among Hispanics, somewhat higher among African Americans and highest among whites. Significantly, the value placed on college education is highest among those who have the lowest rates of participation. Hispanics, who have the lowest participation rates, are the most likely to stress the importance of higher education.

The Societal Perspective

In addition to viewing higher education as important for the individual, the people we interviewed also see higher education as important for society at large. The comments from focus groups help illustrate this conviction:

> *A certain percentage of these college graduates are going to be running this country. These are the leaders of the country.*
>
> *—Man, Old Bridge, New Jersey*

> *If there's a corporation moving into the city, they're going to want people with degrees.*
>
> *—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

In the survey, we asked whether it was possible that the country could reach a point where too many people have a college degree, or whether this was one area where there could never be too much of a good thing. More than three out of four (76%) said that the country could never have too many college graduates. This stands in contrast to what we saw in our first national survey in 1993, just as the country was pulling out of a recession. At that time, a majority (54%) agreed that "too many people are going to college instead of alternatives to college, where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair." Since the question wording on this issue differs in 1993 and 1999, the

Table 5

	Participation in Higher Education of 18-24 Year-Olds	*B.A. Attainment Rates Among the 25+ Population*
Whites	37%	25%
African Americans	30	15
Hispanics	20	11

Sources: "Percentage of the Population 3 to 34 Years Old Enrolled in School, by Age, Gender, Race and Hispanic Origin: October 1947 to 1998." U.S. Census Bureau, 1998. "Percentage of People 25 Years Old and Over Who Have Completed High School or College, by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex: Selected Years 1940 to 1998." U.S. Census Bureau, 1998.

Table 6

Percentage of those who strongly or somewhat agree that "we should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so."

1993 General Public	89%
1999 General Public	93
1999 Parents	95
1999 White Parents	95
1999 African American Parents	93
1999 Hispanic Parents	91

n = 502 general public (1993); 1,015 general public (1999); 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

results are not strictly comparable. However, there seems to be a shift in public sentiment, perhaps reflecting the dramatically expanding job prospects available to recent college graduates in 1999, compared to the prospects of college graduates in 1993. In 1993, people in focus groups frequently talked of the problem of over-education, complete with stories about Ph.D.s driving taxicabs. In 1999, there was little mention of this, and people were much more likely to talk about the need for having educated people in the area to attract industries.

The Importance of Opportunity

Given the importance that people place on higher education, it is hardly surprising that they are equally concerned that everyone who is qualified and motivated has the opportunity to attend a college or university. Access to higher education, in the eyes of many people, is equivalent to access to the current version of the American dream. In effect, the public believes that providing people with opportunities for higher education is the way American society promotes social mobility. As Table 6 shows, there is a virtual consensus (93%) that the nation should not allow the price of a higher education to keep qualified and motivated students from going to college. This value is shared by whites, African Americans and Hispanics.

FINDING TWO

More Than a Piece of Paper

To the public, getting a higher education is much more than putting in time and walking away with a sheepskin—the public holds a long list of expectations for higher education institutions. Colleges should help students develop maturity, organizational skills and an ability to get along with others, and should provide specific skills, such as problem solving and communication. People also have high expectations for the institutions themselves. They want institutions to keep the costs down, but they also want to ensure quality by hiring good teachers and holding students to high standards.

A Degree and So Much More

When we started our research on higher education in 1993, many of the people we spoke with were rather dismissive about what the college experience offered students aside from a degree. Although they spoke frequently about the importance of access to higher education, most took a utilitarian approach, viewing college as not much more than a ticket to a better job. In contrast, we now see a much greater emphasis on the less tangible qualities bestowed by a higher education, over and above the degree itself. This shift is evident when we compare the 1993 focus groups with the 1998 groups. This comment by a California woman in 1993 was typical:

We now see a much greater emphasis on the less tangible qualities bestowed by a higher education, over and above the

> *My husband's boss is 24 years old. He is a kid; he still has a baby face. He has no idea what is going on, but he is the boss. They hired him because he has a degree, and it impressed the bigwigs because they have the same education.*

Many people we talked to in 1993 were frankly mystified by what students actually learned from the courses taught in colleges and universities, other than specific job-related skills. As one mechanic from San Jose said, "Why would I need to study psychology? Am I going to psych out a bus engine?" In 1993 fully 54% agreed that "too many people are going to college instead of alternatives to college where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair."

Today people still cite the importance of the credential, but they also emphasize what they expect students to obtain from a college education. In our most recent survey, for example, we asked people why college graduates tend to get higher salaries. While there is still a significant minority (41%) who think that the higher salaries are due to the fact that "employers just get impressed by

a college degree," the majority (52%) feel that the reason for the higher salaries is that "a college degree means someone has skills and accomplishments." In the most recent focus groups, participants sometimes had trouble describing exactly what these skills and accomplishments are, but throughout these groups there was a palpable sense that colleges are expected to deliver much more than a degree.

Focusing on an Array of Skills

Americans clearly expect colleges and universities to provide a full-service, "value- added" experience for their students. Rather than only emphasizing the basics, the public's list of expectations for higher education institutions is expansive. To examine the public's priorities, we presented respondents with an inventory of eight competencies that a student might be expected to acquire from attending college. As Table 7 reveals, the public has high expectations for what is important, identifying several factors as absolutely essential.

1. Self-Direction and Interpersonal Skills

At the top of people's list of expectations was what one of the focus group participants from Charlotte, North Carolina, called "life skills," such as time management, organization and an ability to get along with other people. While these skills are obviously important in the workplace, they are broader in their implications for and impact on every area of life.

Table 7

How important is each of following in terms of what students should gain from attending college?

	Absolutely essential	*Important but not essential*	*Not too important*
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own	71%	26%	2%
An ability to get along with people different from themselves	68	29	2
An improved ability to solve problems and think analytically	63	34	1
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet	61	35	4
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they've chosen	60	35	4
Top-notch writing and speaking skills	57	38	4
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering	44	47	9
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history	32	53	14

n = 1,015 general public

For many people, especially when they think about younger students, what is most remarkable about the college years is that students are exposed to a much more diverse and challenging environment and are given a great deal more freedom. Students must learn how to be the captains of their own ships, without parents or teachers regularly monitoring them. This in turn challenges them to develop self-discipline

and self-direction. As one woman in a New Jersey focus group said:

> *You gain your independence in college. When you cut a class in high school, someone is after you, but in college it's up to you. And you meet a lot of people from different backgrounds. You hear what someone else is talking about—maybe it is about abortion or the Catholic Church—and you defend your view. It tests your character.*

Seventy-one percent said that a sense of maturity and the ability to manage on one's own are an absolutely essential competency that students need to acquire in college, and an equally high percentage (68%) also said that an ability to get along with different people is absolutely essential (see Table 7). When we asked people to pick out the single most important factor, getting along with different people rose to the top of the list (see Table D in the Supporting Tables).

In focus groups, people constantly stressed the importance of these skills, and thought that they were valuable even if they did not translate directly into a job (or a higher-paying job) right out of college. The general feeling was that self-direction and knowing how to get along with others were skills that could best be developed in college and that would be of enormous value at many stages in one's life.

> *I really want my son to go away from home to a four-year college. It is not that I want to get rid of him, but college was the time when I really grew up and was away from my parents and had to make decisions on my own. Everything I was doing was on me, and I got to learn about myself.*
>
> *—Man, Chicago, Illinois*

2. Specific Skills and Knowledge

The maturity and breadth of outlook mentioned above are important, but this is not all that people expect students to take away from higher education. As Table 7 shows, the public also wants students to become problem solvers. Nearly two-thirds (63%) say that it is absolutely essential that students learn to solve problems and think analytically. The public also places a strong emphasis on high-tech skills, as well as the specific expertise that will be needed in the student's chosen career. Top-notch writing and speaking skills are deemed just a bit less important. As the emphasis on these skills suggests, people are very much concerned about what students learn in their classes. As we will see in a moment, the importance of these academic skills is further reinforced by the

public's emphasis on good teachers and high standards. Some comments from a focus group in Charlotte, North Carolina:

> *You learn how to approach a problem, how to think, and you get to know yourself.*

> *When we hire someone without a college degree, they just don't seem to have the knowledge that they need for a job. We ask them to produce a quarterly report, and they say, "What's that?"*

The public is somewhat more ambivalent about areas such as citizenship and exposure to the humanities, which score significantly lower. We found considerable division, for example, on whether students in college should undertake activities that are designed to increase a sense of civic responsibility, such as community service. Some of our respondents felt that this was as essential a part of learning as any other. One African American man in Chicago put it this way:

> *They should be made to do community service. Many students have come from little small towns and that is all they have seen, and when they leave they haven't learned anything. If they were to go out to African American communities, they would learn something.*

Other respondents felt that while it might be commendable for students to involve themselves in civic activities if they want to, this was a frill rather than the main reason why they are attending college.

> *I want my son to learn civic responsibility, but it is not the core issue in college. You either have it before you go to college—and it helps you broaden your horizons—or you don't have it and probably won't get it.*
>
> *—Man, Santa Clara, California*

For supporters of the liberal arts curricula, the findings present good and bad news. Of the items on the list of expectations, the public places the least importance on "exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history." The value of the "great books"—or the humanities field itself—seems to be relegated to a lower level of interest. On the other hand, the public emphasizes skills also valued by advocates of the liberal arts, such as analytical thinking and top-notch writing and speaking skills.

Higher Education Administrators Charged with Many Duties

While Americans expect colleges and universities to teach many different skills to students, they also hold high expectations for the manner in which these institutions are run. To gauge these, we presented a list of 11 tasks and asked which were absolutely essential priorities for higher education administrators (see Table 8). The two tasks most often rated as absolutely essential were controlling the cost of running the institution and hiring excellent teachers. Maintaining high academic standards is another area of importance. The general message is clear: not surprisingly, the public likes efficient institutions with low costs, but at the same time wants institutions to provide the highest academic quality.

1. Holding Down Costs

The public thinks that higher education institutions must do their own part in keeping college affordable, so that qualified and motivated students have an opportunity for a higher education. People in focus groups tended to view colleges as big organizations with their own agendas, and they were concerned that, left to themselves, colleges would run up both the costs and the tuition. This is reflected in the public's priorities. At the top of the list of what people expect administrators to do is to control costs. Nearly three out of four (73%) say that it is absolutely essential that colleges and universities control their costs and spend money efficiently. There is also strong support for the view that administrators should keep tuition from rising, with 60% rating this as absolutely essential. We also found a high level of support for the idea that "colleges should be doing a

Table 8

Now, I'd like to ask you how important each of the following things are for college administrators—the people running the schools—to focus on accomplishing.

	Absolutely essential	*Important but not essential*	*Not too important*
Control costs and spend money efficiently	73%	24%	2%
Attract the best possible teachers and researchers to their colleges	70	28	2
Ensure students work hard to achieve high academic standards	61	32	5
Keep the price of tuition from rising	60	35	3
Provide extra help such as tutoring students who fall behind	56	37	6
Make sure the personal behavior of students doesn't get too far out of line	56	35	8
Provide career counseling and job placement	54	41	5
Find ways to help their local K–12 schools improve	54	36	8
Try to have a diverse student population, with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds	39	46	14
Lower the number of students who drop out or who are taking too long to finish	29	44	23
Support extracurricular activities such as cultural events, sports and clubs	21	59	20

n = 1,015 general public

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much better job of keeping their costs down"—60% strongly agree with this statement. One of our callback interviewees put it this way:

> *Lots of kids can't go to school because it costs so darn much. When they borrow the money they need, they get so swamped with debts that they are broke even before they start their jobs. The colleges need to help by not raising their rates all of the time.*
>
> *—Woman, Spencer, Nebraska*

2. Hiring Good Teachers and Maintaining High Quality

In addition to being concerned about holding costs down, the public is equally concerned about preserving quality. Seventy percent say that attracting the best teachers and researchers is an absolutely essential goal for college administrators. This factor also topped the list when people were asked to identify the single most important factor. As a man in Philadelphia said:

> *A good teacher in college could really grab a student who is maybe taking the class because they have to, and really catapult them into a different area that the student might not have been exposed to. But a bad teacher might not recognize a talent in a student, and it might not be developed in a way beneficial for mankind.*

Ahigh percentage (61%) also rate high academic standards as absolutely essential. In focus groups, people said that high standards are important both as a way to challenge students and to improve the reputation of the college and the marketability of its graduates.

> *I think it's important that colleges have high standards. They need to focus on something, and they need to reach for something, they need something to strive for. If they don't have these sorts of standards, then things can fall apart.*
>
> *—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

As Table 8 shows, other factors, such as monitoring students' behavior and helping students find jobs when they graduate, fall to a slightly lower level. Interest in maintaining a diverse population (often a high priority with college administrators) is perceived as relatively less important. African American parents, however, are much more likely to stress diversity, with 59% saying that this is absolutely essential, compared to 39% of the population as a whole.

FINDING THREE

The Responsibility Rests with the Student, But Institutions Should Help Those Who Help Themselves

The public, in contrast to how it views K–12 education, tends to emphasize the responsibility of college students, but this does not mean that they exempt higher education institutions from any responsibility. This attitude is manifested in areas such as remediation and financial aid. The public expects schools to help students who are having trouble, but the initiative should come from individuals.

High Expectations for Students, Too

In addition to high expectations for institutions, the public also has high expectations for students themselves.

In addition to high expectations for institutions, the public also has high expectations for students themselves. When people talk about students, the values that most frequently come to mind are responsibility and motivation. As we have seen in Finding Two, one of the most important things that students are expected to learn is a sense of individual responsibility. Responsibility is also the key value that people bring to their thinking about what should be expected of students.

When people talk about K–12 education, they tend to stress the contributions that schools can make to the success of students. Most people believe that if schools put enough time and energy into a youngster, they can usually help that child improve. For example, 75% of Americans say that just about all kids can learn and succeed in school, given enough help and attention. Only 20% say that some kids won't learn or succeed no matter how much help and attention they get.[2] As students move into the college years, however, the public is much more ready to hold students responsible for their own success or failure.

Looking first at success, most people believe that success in higher education has more to do with the effort the student brings to the college experience and much less to do with the quality of the college. To test this, we asked our respondents whether the benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends more on the quality of the college or on how much effort the student puts in. There is overwhelming agreement (88%) with the idea that it is the student's effort that is the key factor. As one of our callback interviewees from Hernando, Florida, said, "If you don't want to be there, you won't learn anything, no matter how good the school is." Indeed, the percentage of people who feel this way has jumped since we first asked this question in 1993 (see Table 9).

Table 9

Which of the following two statements comes closest to your own view?

	1999	1993
The benefit a student gets from attending college depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in	88%	71%
OR		
The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on the quality of the college he or she is attending	11	23
Don't know	2	7

n = 1,015 general public (1999); 502 general public (1993)

In effect, as the public has come to place more importance on a college education, people have also placed more responsibility on students. This does not mean that good teachers and good facilities are unimportant (as we have seen, the public thinks good teachers are absolutely essential), but people feel that no amount of good teaching can compensate for a lack of motivation in a student. In the public's view, a motivated student can learn in almost any college.

Responsibility and the Struggling Student

Understanding the public's emphasis on responsibility also helps us see how people feel about helping students who do poorly in college. Everyone knows that some students do not adjust well to college. Not surprisingly, the attitude of most people seems to be that this is part of the learning experience of higher education. As a result, they also tend to place the responsibility for failure with the individual, not with the institution. Seventy-one percent say that it is the student's own responsibility to get back on track, while only 24% think that the college should take primary responsibility.

But there is also support for assisting struggling students who are willing to help themselves. The majority (56%) believes that it is absolutely essential that colleges provide tutors for students who fall behind. Even in the case of "a student who constantly slacks off and does not apply him/herself," 68% say that the student should receive counseling and be assigned an advisor; only 31% say the student should either merely receive a warning or be left alone.

Just as people are much more likely to credit individual college students—rather than the institutions they attend—for their success, they are also much more likely to put the responsibility for failure on the student rather than the institution. This is most clear when we ask who is responsible for college dropouts, the public is prepared to blame almost anyone other than the colleges (see Table 10). Nearly half (47%) blame the students themselves, and a healthy minority (38%) blame the high schools, but only 10% put the blame on the colleges. These proportions hold steady across the board, even when comparing across white, African American and Hispanic parents. As one man

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in Charlotte, North Carolina, put it:

> *It is not the responsibility of the school [college] to get the student focused. If the student fails, it's not the school's fault.*

Table 10

Some students start college but can't keep up with the work and end up dropping out. In general, who would you say is most responsible for this?

The students themselves	47%
The high school, because they didn't prepare the students	38
The colleges, because they should do more to help the students	10
Don't know	6

n = 1,015 general public

In short, while the public would like to see colleges make an effort to assist students who are at risk of dropping out, they expect students themselves to take primary responsibility. Only 29% say that lowering the dropout rate is an absolutely essential task for colleges, a score that is much lower than other priorities (see Table 8). A majority (76%) agrees that the country can never reach a point where there are too many college graduates. However, many also agree that there are too many students in college today who do not belong there.

Responsibility-Based Financial Aid

Given the importance of college, it is hardly surprising that most Americans think that providing financial aid for students is vital. While people expect colleges and universities to do their best to hold down the costs, they also expect government to help provide financial support for qualified and motivated students. Surveys by other organizations have found that large majorities support government programs such as tax breaks (87%)[3] and student loans (84%).[4] We asked our respondents what they thought should happen if colleges were to face a serious shortage of funds. There was virtually no support for measures that would decrease the opportunity of students to attend college, with only 9% wanting to solve the problem by admitting fewer students and 7% calling for higher fees. Instead, most people thought that government should make up the shortfall or that colleges themselves should pick up the slack (see Table 11).

Table 11

Suppose the colleges in your state faced a serious shortage of money. What would be the best way to solve the problem? Should the colleges:

Get more funding from the state government	55%
Cut costs and expect professors to teach more classes	22
Admit fewer students	9
Charge higher fees and tuition	7
Don't know	7

n = 1,015 general public

Although the public thinks that financial aid is important, and that government should play a role in providing it, many Americans also bring the principles of responsibility and motivation to bear on their thinking about how financial aid should be distributed.

1. No Free Rides

The first principle is that students should contribute toward their own higher education. While Americans are deeply committed to the idea that every qualified student should have an opportunity to attend college, they reject the idea that a free college education should be an entitlement. Most agree that paying for at least part of one's education is a part of taking responsibility for one's own life, and is, once again, an important lesson to be learned in college. Almost three out of four either strongly agree (47%) or somewhat agree (27%) that students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying the costs. The European style of totally state-subsidized higher education does not resonate well with the American notion of responsibility-based aid.

> *I think that anyone, no matter how destitute they are, should work or do something to help defray their expenses, because they will appreciate it more than if it was just a gift handed to them on a silver platter.*
>
> *—Man (callback interview), Anderson, Alabama*

2. Aid Should Go First to the Motivated

When it comes to deciding which students should get financial aid, people are drawn to the needs of students who work hard and take individual responsibility. Other qualities, such as family background or native intelligence, are much less important to people than the inner drive of the student. To test this, we posed some difficult dilemmas to our survey respondents. We asked whether financial aid should go to a student with average academic skills who works hard or a student with excellent skills who doesn't work hard (see Table 12). There was no question in most people's mind, with 85% awarding the aid to the hardworking student. But it was more difficult for people to choose between a middle-class student with outstanding academic abilities and a student from a very poor family who has average academic abilities. Here the public was more

Table 12

Suppose you were in charge of giving out financial help at a college and the money was running out. If you had to choose, which of these two students would you feel most deserved financial help?

A student who has only average academic skills but works hard in school	85%
OR	
A student who has excellent academic skills but does not work hard in school	11
Don't know	4
A student who comes from a middle class family and has outstanding academic abilities	52%
OR	
A student who comes from a very poor family and has average academic abilities	39
Don't know	9

n = 1,015 general public

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closely divided, but people gave the nod (52% to 39%) to the student with outstanding abilities. But 61% of African American parents and 51% of Hispanic parents preferred that the aid be given to the economically disadvantaged student. In focus groups, both African American and Hispanic parents stressed the difficulties that some minority students have in gaining access to higher education.

In focus groups, we asked our respondents to discuss how they felt about basing financial aid solely on motivation. Most people said that, at least in theory, this would be the ideal way to do it. But they also brought up the difficulty of measuring motivation, and pointed out that many of the usual measures (such as grades and test scores) cannot really make these types of distinctions. As one woman in Philadelphia said:

> *You can't just go by IQ. I mean, you might have a bright person who is a very hard worker and just keeps growing and keeps working and shouldn't be penalized. But I've seen that the person who is very bright sometimes doesn't have the motivation, and wastes 90 percent of what he has.*

3. Tax Breaks Are the Best Way to Reward Motivation

We also asked our respondents to compare various forms of financial aid—grants, loans, work-study, and tax breaks. Not surprisingly, people supported all these measures (and parents of high school students were especially positive). But the public makes a clear differentiation between different forms of aid. As Table 13 shows, the most popular approach is tax breaks. Some experts worry that tax breaks assist middle-class and affluent Americans but do not benefit low-income earners; however, it's unlikely that most of the public has considered this. Here the idea seems to be to reward responsibility on the part of parents. The thinking seems to be that when people are given tax breaks, they have more of their own money to spend. And the general feeling is that people are most likely to be responsible with their own dollars. As one woman from Charlotte, North Carolina said:

Table 13

I am going to read you several ways for state and federal government to make a college education more affordable to academically qualified students. [INSERT ITEM] Do you think government should use this more often than it does now, less often or use it about as often as it does now?

	More Often	*Less Often*	*About as Often*
Government gives tax breaks or tax credits to help students and their families pay for college	78%	5%	15%
Government provides students with opportunities to work for the financial aid they get	73	5	18
Government makes money available for student loans	57	4	34
Government grants money directly to students	48	11	34

n = 1,015 general public

Tax breaks are good because they create an incentive to save for college. It feels more like getting more money.

Work-study comes in as a close second behind tax breaks. People like work-study because it rewards students who are willing to work for their own education. While people think that giving a person a free state-subsidized education is a bad idea, they think that asking someone to work for an education is more likely to reward those who really want it.

4. Help Individuals, Not Institutions

The importance of individual responsibility also influences the public's attitudes about whether government financial assistance should go directly to institutions or to individuals. Americans clearly prefer giving money to individuals (where responsibility can be rewarded) rather than giving more money to colleges and universities directly. By a margin of more than two-to-one (66% to 27%), people think that if their state had more money for higher education, it should go to qualified students, rather than directly to colleges. In focus groups, people explained this preference in two ways, both of which appeal to the value of responsibility. If money is given to individuals, they said, it will reward and support individual motivation and effort. Conversely, the focus group respondents feared that money given directly to institutions would be swallowed up in administrative expenses and never really reach students.

Please, give the money to the individuals so someone who needs it can go to college, rather than giving it to some college so they can build a new athletics building that they don't need anyway.

—Woman (callback interview), Boise, Idaho

I would give it to individuals. Because college expenses are always gonna be up. They're not gonna reduce tuition. The individuals are applying to college— they're the ones who are motivated to go. The individual is initiating the interest there.

—Woman, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Twenty years ago, I would have said give it to the colleges. When I was in college, I had to wait till my senior year before I was able to take computer science. Today LaSalle isn't a college, it's a university. They are pulling in the money, and you can take more diverse courses today. Colleges have the money they need and the teachers too. They don't need any more money. I say, give it to the individual.

—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

FINDING FOUR

Paying for College Is Difficult but Doable

Despite the often-heard complaints about the high cost of higher education, most people believe that anyone who really wants a college education can get one. Parents say that they are worried about paying for their own children's education, but they also say that they are confident that their children will go to college and that they will work out a way to pay for it. Most people agree that people from low-income families have a more difficult time than others.

The media have given a great deal of coverage to the high price tag of higher education, particularly at the elite private schools. Seventy-one percent of the public say that paying for college is more difficult today than it was ten years ago. People are also concerned about the amount of debt that students are taking on, with 80% at least somewhat agreeing that students have to borrow too much money to pay for a college education.

Despite the concern about the escalating price of higher education, most people believe that if a student is really motivated to get an education there are ways to make it happen. Such a student may have to make compromises, such as going to a less expensive school or working part-time, but if the motivation is sufficient, education is within reach. Nearly nine out of ten (87%) at least somewhat agree that "if someone really wants to go to college, they can find a way to pay for it, even if they have to go to school and work at the same time." Nearly two-thirds (63%) strongly agree with this statement. As a woman in a New Jersey focus group put it, "Anyone who wants to go to college can go to college."

Many people also feel that financial assistance is available, especially to a student who is willing to take on some loans. Sixty-two percent agree that almost anyone who needs financial help to attend college can obtain loans or financial aid. Community colleges are often mentioned as a less expensive alternative, and people frequently point out that students can save a great deal of money by going to a community college for the first two years and then transferring to a four-year school. Parents in California were particularly enthusiastic about the availability of inexpensive community college education for the first two years.

> *You can go to community college and then transfer to a state university or even to UC. When you graduate it doesn't say that you did your first two years at De Anza.*
>
> *—Woman, Santa Clara, California*

Table 14

Do you believe that currently in your state, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?

	1999	1993
There are many people who don't have the opportunity	47%	60%
Vast majority of those qualified have the opportunity	45	37
Don't know	8	4

n = 1,015 general public (1999); 502 general public (1993)

Although people seem to believe that it is possible for virtually any qualified student to attend college, they also believe that many qualified students are still not attending college because of the high price. In both the 1993 and 1999 surveys, we asked respondents if they believe that many qualified students are excluded from a higher education because of the price tag (see Table 14). When we first asked this question in 1993, when the country was just coming out of a recession, six out of ten Americans were convinced that college was out of reach for many qualified students. In 1999 that percentage dropped significantly, but a plurality (47%) still thinks that many qualified students do not have the opportunity to attend college. African American parents (63%) and Hispanic parents (64%) are even more likely to hold this opinion.

How does this finding square with the belief that anyone who really wants to attend a college or university can find a way to do so? We discussed this apparent contradiction with the respondents in our Philadelphia focus group. They described the considerable slippage between a person's ability to attend college and his or her actually doing so, citing many reasons why qualified people are unable to take advantage of the opportunities that are available. For example, a person may be overwhelmed by the process of putting together the necessary combination of aid and part-time work, or may be unaware of the support that is available, or may have other commitments that prevent them from attending.

> *It takes a lot of effort. Not superhuman effort, but it takes a lot of effort and commitment to go to college if you don't have the money for it. I think a lot of people, when they take a look at it, are overwhelmed by the process and the commitment. Maybe they lack the confidence that they can do it.*
>
> *—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

> *There are individuals who could fall through the cracks who would want to go to college and just can't. Maybe it is because of other obligations that occupy their time. Alot of it has to do with a lack of confidence and their inability to juggle everything.*
>
> *—Woman, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

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Parents: We'll Manage Somehow

There is no question that people think that paying for college is extremely difficult, and parents are particularly nervous. Usually, discussions of paying for college begin with a chorus of groans, and parents often complain not only about the price of tuition, but also about the expenses associated with fees and books. Many people feel that parents are not doing what they need to do to save money for their children's college expenses. Only 28% of our respondents, for example, think that most families are doing a good job of saving for their children's college education. Parents also give themselves a negative assessment: 61% feel that they should have done more to financially prepare for their child's college education (see Table 15). There is also a lot of worry about college expenses from the parents who will have to pay them. Nearly seven out of ten (69%) parents who expect their children to go to college say they are either very worried or somewhat worried about being able to afford college expenses.

At the end of the day, however, most parents think that they will somehow be able to cope. Three-quarters (75%) of all parents of high school students think that it is either certain or very likely that their oldest child will attend college, and of this group, the overwhelming majority (93%) say that they will find a way to work out the cost. Two parents in a Philadelphia focus group put it this way:

> *It is stressful, but if you want your child to go to college, then you're gonna do what you have to do.*

> *If the desire is there, you make a way for your children. A lot of times you prepare from the day they're born. Other times if they're ready to graduate from high school and you don't have all the money, you make choices. You might not be able to send them to the best.*

The views of minority parents are not so different from the views of white parents on this topic. Hispanic parents who think their child will attend college are more worried about finding a way to pay for college—43% say they are very worried, compared to only 26% of white parents. But 84% of Hispanic parents agree with African American parents (92%) and white parents (94%) in saying that they will find a way to work out the costs.

Table 15

Percentage of parents who say...	
It is "certain" or "very likely" their child will attend college*	75%
They are "very" or "somewhat" worried about paying for college expenses†	69
They "should have done more" to financially prepare for their child's college education†	61
They "will find a way to work out the costs" of college†	93

* n = 200 parents of high school students

† n = 178 parents of high school students who say it is certain/very likely/somewhat likely that their child will attend college

Who Is Hardest Hit?

In popular discussions of higher education and opportunity, there is a debate about which groups of students have more or less opportunity to attend college. Are minority students denied opportunities because of prejudice? Are poor students constrained by lack of funding? Some would argue that members of the middle class have the hardest time, because they are too well-off to get scholarships, but too poor to pay higher education bills. Others worry more about older workers who are coming back to the workplace seeking retraining.

Table 16

Do you think qualified students from [INSERT ITEM] have less opportunity, more opportunity or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?

Opportunity compared to others	*Less*	*More*	*About the Same*
Qualified students from low-income families, regardless of their ethnic background	46%	15%	36%
People who are older and are going back to school for retraining	37	15	42
Qualified students from middle class families, regardless of their ethnic background	16	22	60
Qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities, such as blacks or Latinos	29	25	41

n = 1,015 general public

We asked respondents to think about these groups and tell us which have more or less opportunity than others (see Table 16). Students from low-income families attracted the most concern. Forty-six percent say that these students have less opportunity when compared to others. Far fewer respondents were concerned about either middle-class students or students from racial minorities. Eighty-two percent think that students from middle-class families have either the same opportunity (60%) or more opportunity (22%) than others. Only 29% say that racial minorities such as blacks or Latinos have less opportunity than others.

The "Embattled Middle Class"?

It is sometimes suggested that the middle class has a harder time affording college, because they have too much money to qualify for scholarships yet are still too strapped to pay the bills. This tension is not of great concern when people are asked in a straightforward way about which groups have more or less opportunity to attend college. Indeed, we see little difference on this topic between the attitudes of middle-class Americans and the attitudes of those who are less well-off. For example, six in ten respondents with a household income of $35,000 to 50,000 say that middle-class families have the same opportunity as others, and six in ten of those making less than $25,000 in household income agree.

But we also invited our survey respondents to consider two students attending the same four-year college, one from a low-income family and one from a middle-class family. When asked which student would find it easier to

pay for college, 48% named the middle-class student, because of family resources. Yet, almost as many (43%) named the low-income student, because of financial aid. Two women in a Charlotte, North Carolina, focus group came out on opposite sides of the issue:

> *Who has the hardest time? The middle-income bracket—rich folks can afford college, low-income people get special loans, but middle-income mom and dad and kid really have to work to get their kid through college.*

> *I say give the money to those with lower income. The middle-class will fight to make college happen, but a lower income may give up instead, and then their kids don't go to college.*

Our interpretation is that this may be a sore spot for some people. Many Americans believe that a middle-class family will ultimately find a way to send their kids to college, while a low-income family probably cannot do this without financial assistance. But questions that remind people about the difficulties middle-class families face in paying for college may evoke some resentment. The message from the middle-class seems to be: "We may be able to afford this, but don't think that the poor are the only ones who are scrambling to send their kids to college. We need help too."

Many Americans believe that a middle-class family will ultimately find a way to send their kids to college, while a low-income family probably cannot do this without

Concerns about Older Workers

Interestingly, concern about the opportunities available to older workers seeking retraining seems to be growing. When we first asked about these opportunities nearly two years ago, older workers were at the bottom of the respondents' list of concerns. Today, however, concern about this group is second only to concern about low-income students. But unlike the case of low-income students, it is not clear if the problem of "opportunity" is associated with older workers' ability to pay, their lack of time or the pressures of supporting a family. We asked our focus group respondents what the difficulties are for older workers; several asserted that the pace of life has increased so much that it is harder for people to take the time to further their education.

> *What we've seen in the last ten years is for older people, jobs have been downsized. What's once done in a department of six is now done in one of two. Which means they have more responsibilities, they're working more hours, tougher hours. It also means that it's tougher for them to get enough time to take classes.*
>
> *—Man, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

FINDING FIVE

High Satisfaction, Low Familiarity— In Contrast with Leaders

The majority of the public believes that higher education is delivering a valuable service and that a college education is available to anyone who really wants one. At least for the moment, the public is satisfied with the nation's higher education, and people are much more likely to focus their attention on other issues that they perceive as more problematic. For a variety of reasons, most Americans do not know a great deal about the details of higher education administration and financing, and have not yet taken a position on some of the questions and debates about higher education that have engaged the nation's leaders.

High Marks for Higher Education

We asked our survey respondents to evaluate their local colleges. The results show high levels of satisfaction, especially compared to the marks given to local K–12 schools. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say that the colleges in their state are doing a good (42%) or excellent (15%) job. This is considerably higher than the one in three Americans who give their local public high schools good (27%) or excellent (6%) ratings (see Table 17). In the dozens of focus groups Public Agenda has conducted on K–12 education, we invariably hear complaints about students who are disrespectful, undisciplined and lack basic skills, and people refer constantly to media reports about school violence and shootings. Very few such complaints were raised in our discussions of higher education. Another factor that impresses people about higher education is how attractive American colleges and universities are to foreign students.

Table 17

Would you say the [SEE BELOW] in your state are doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?

	Excellent/ Good	*Poor/ Fair*	*Don't Know*
Public high schools	34%	41%	25%
College	57	15	28
Four-year colleges	55	13	33
Two-year community colleges	50	16	34

n = 1,015 general public
Note: Numbers in table are rounded.

> *Part of the proof that they are doing a good job is where the students are coming from. You don't see our students going overseas—everyone is coming here. If you have a good product everyone will come for it.*
>
> *—Man, Old Bridge, New Jersey*

Indeed, public satisfaction with higher education seems to be increasing. Over the years we have been studying higher education, for example, we have seen a drop in the percentage of people who believe that colleges are failing to teach the important things students need to know. The percentage of people who believe this has dropped steadily from 33% in 1993 to 28% in 1998 and to 19% in our most recent survey. (Asomewhat different wording of the question makes these results not strictly comparable.[5]) Here, the fact that the public puts so much emphasis on individual responsibility may work to the advantage of higher education institutions. When there are problems, the public tends to blame the college student, not the institution.

A large percentage of people...say that they just don't know enough to evaluate the performance of colleges in their state.

Limited Knowledge

People also acknowledge that they do not know a great deal about the workings of higher education. Indeed, even the favorable evaluation we report in the preceding section reveals a large percentage of people who say that they just don't know enough to evaluate the performance of colleges in their state. The percentage of those who don't know is even higher when we ask specifically about two-year or four-year institutions.

This lack of information may reflect the fact that most people have little firsthand contact with colleges and universities. Here again, the contrast with attitudes toward K–12 is striking. In focus groups about K–12, people often say that they personally know teachers, staff or school board members (in some communities the school district is one of the largest employers). Many parents carefully monitor their own children's progress and have regular contact with teachers and principals. The fact that public schools are financed by dedicated taxes means that homeowners (even those without children in the schools) are often painfully aware of exactly how much they are paying to support their local schools. In our studies of public education, the majority (55%) of the public says that they get their information about the K–12 schools first-hand; only 40% say they get their most useful information from television, radio or newspapers.[6]

Most Americans are much less aware of what happens in higher education institutions. One reason is that they are much less likely to have personal experience with higher education, since only about 32% of Americans over the age of 25 have a two-year or four-year degree.[7] Also, parents in focus groups tell us that they are less likely to have detailed knowledge of what their college-age children are doing on a day-to-day basis. In a callback interview, a father from Santa Monica with a daughter in high school and a son in college drew the contrast this way:

Definitely I know much more about high school. I talk to our daughter every day. We talk about what is good and bad, we participate in events. Our son is away at school and we talk to him a couple of times a week. We ask, "How is it going?" He says, "Fine." I don't know what he is doing and how he is relating to his teachers.

The public also has little awareness of how higher education is financed. In most states, support for public higher education comes from general revenues, rather than from a dedicated tax. As a result, people don't know how much public money is allocated to higher education. When we asked respondents whether state colleges in their area get most of their money from students, from state government, or from both equally, a majority (52%) said that they didn't know enough to answer. This is an extremely high percentage of "don't know" responses; survey researchers find that people are usually reluctant to say that they don't know the answer to a question. Only a minority (16%) gave the correct answer: that most of the financing for state colleges comes from state government. Most people who did venture an opinion thought that the funds came from students themselves or from students and state sources equally.

Table 18

Where do you think the state colleges in your area get most of their money? Is it from the student fees, from the state government, from both about equally, or don't you know enough to say?

From both about equally	22%
From the state government	16
From student fees and tuition	10
Don't know enough to say	52

Leaders and the General Public Disagree about the Urgency of Reform

The public's combination of a high level of satisfaction and a low level of knowledge stands in contrast to the views of the nation's leaders, as measured by our 1998 survey of 601 business executives, higher education administrators and deans, college faculty members and government officials. Leaders shared the public's initially favorable overall evaluation of higher education; for example, 73% agreed that "our system of higher education is the best in the world." But when it came to the specifics, leaders had some deep concerns and strident debates that are not yet on the public's radar screen.

1. Higher Levels of Knowledge among Leaders

Generally speaking, leaders tend to have a level of familiarity with local colleges and universities similar to that which members of the general public have with local K–12 schools. Obviously, professors and college administrators were well informed but so were business leaders. The vast majority of the business leaders we interviewed have a four-year or graduate degree, and as

employers they have firsthand acquaintance with the skills and abilities of recent college graduates. In interviews, business leaders talked knowledgeably about the details of higher education, had acquaintances who are higher education faculty or administrators, and often spoke from personal experience about their local higher education institutions.

2. Remediation: A Big Problem for Leaders, But Low Awareness and Concern for the Public

One of the most pressing problems facing higher education, according to the leadership groups we surveyed, is that many students who go to college are not adequately prepared to do college work. We presented these leaders with a list of 16 possible problems facing higher education. The item that topped the list is that too many new students require remedial education: 88% of leaders said that this is a very or somewhat serious problem.

Other Public Agenda research underscores this point; for example, 60% of local business leaders say "a high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics." Forty-three percent of college professors say that graduates from the public high schools "really lack the skills needed to succeed in college."[8]

The general public does not share this sense of unease. Parents are confident in the preparedness of their own children, but most Americans do not know much about the general issue. Fifty-four percent of parents say that their high school child will have the good work habits and academic skills needed for college; another 41% think that their child will be at least partially ready. But 52% of the public say that they don't know if academically unprepared students pose a problem for the colleges in their state.

In some states, leaders are intensely debating whether students should receive remediation in four-year colleges, but the public takes a much more pragmatic attitude toward preparedness: 67% of the public thinks that if a student is not up to college work, he or she should either be admitted to a two-year college and be required to take classes to catch up (53%) or not be admitted at all (14%). Only a minority (29%) thinks that such students should attend a four-year college and be required to take remedial classes (see Table 19). On the other hand, once students are admitted to college, the majority expects the institution to provide extra support to those who are struggling. A majority (68%) says that even in the case of a student who "constantly slacks off," the college should provide counseling and try to work with the student, rather than try more severe approaches.

3. Higher Education Efficiency and Accountability: Deep Divisions among Leaders, Lower Levels of Concern among the Public

The leadership community is also locked in serious debates about topics such as higher education financing, efficiency and accountability. Here business executives and college professors have very different views.

Business executives tend to see higher education as inefficient and unproductive, and they feel that higher education needs to adopt some of the strategies that business has learned in the last few decades. They express high hopes for technology and are put off by policies such as tenure. Higher education insiders, especially faculty members, take the opposite points of view. They feel that that the measures usually mentioned as strategies to make higher education more productive and accountable will cause more harm than good. As Table 20 shows, there are deep divisions between business executives and professors on topics such as efficiency, teaching loads, technology and tenure.

Business leaders also want to see some belt-tightening from the colleges, and they are open to the possibility of greater contributions from students and their parents. Eighty-eight percent of business leaders think that colleges should absorb increases in operating costs by cutting costs, and 65% think students and their parents should pay more.

Although the general public agrees that colleges should control costs and spend money efficiently, the public has little information about how well or how poorly higher education institutions are doing in this area. We asked several questions about these topics and, again, what is most remarkable is the high percentage of people who say they just do not know enough to answer. For example, we asked the general public whether colleges are careful and efficient with their money. Half say they don't know enough to have an opinion, and those who do take a position are closely divided. When asked whether colleges are working hard to control the price of college education, the plurality (45%) say they do not know enough to give an opinion, 39% say that colleges raise their prices whenever they can, and only 15%

Table 19

What is the best way to deal with college applicants who lack the necessary skills to succeed in college?

Only admit them to a two-year college and require them to take classes to catch up	53%
Don't admit them unless they have the necessary skills to do college-level work	14
Admit them to a four-year college but require them to take classes to catch up	29
Don't know	4

n = 1,015 general public

What do you think a college should do about a student who constantly slacks off and does not apply him/herself in class? Should the college:

Give him/her counseling and assign an advisor to try to work with him/her	68%
Give him/her a serious warning and expel him/her if s/he doesn't improve	26
Let him/her work things out for him/herself	6
Don't know	1

n = 1,015 general public

say that colleges are working hard to control prices. In contrast, 72% of business leaders think that colleges use the easy availability of loans to keep raising tuition.

Generally speaking, the public has been interested in higher education financing mostly from the perspective of the individual consumer. When we asked people to choose one source of additional revenues for public higher education, the majority (55%) said that they preferred to see revenues come from state government, rather than from cost cutting (22%), admitting fewer students (9%) or raising fees and tuition (7%). This preference for state funding, however, must be viewed in the proper context: The majority of the public has given little thought to higher education financing, so most have not weighed these options carefully. Moreover, respondents were not pressed on this question; for instance, none was asked if he or she would approve of increased state funding if it meant higher taxes.

Table 20

	Business Leaders	*College Professors*
Business and government have had to become leaner and more efficient—higher education must now do the same	83%	40%
The easy availability of student loans allows colleges to keep raising tuition instead of improving efficiency and cutting costs	72	25
Higher education has a lot to learn from the private sector — adopting more business practices will make colleges more efficient and productive	64	17
Changes from technology on higher education will be for the better	62	25
Too many professors have light teaching loads	58	26
Tenure is essential to protecting academic freedom	22	78*

n = 146 business leaders (CEOs, owners, presidents, or general managers of companies with 50 or more employees); 130 college professors

* Tenured professors only

Source: Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda, 1999)

No News Is Good News

As we have seen, people think that higher education is doing a good job, and that a college education is generally accessible to anyone who really wants to get one. At the same time, people don't know very much about the details of how higher education institutions operate. Putting these two factors together suggests that public satisfaction with higher education is sincere but not fully informed. Compared to other more immediate public policy issues—health care, crime, K-12 schooling or social security—the higher education system is not something that most people feel is in urgent need of major reform. Higher education is important to the public, and the survey findings document the general emphasis on access and quality. But the public currently does not feel compelled to worry about the fine points that concern leaders, such as how efficiently college administrators are running institutions. The fact that higher education is very important in the personal

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lives of many families does not in itself catapult the issue to the top of the national agenda.

The public's attitude toward the importance of the federal government in helping with college financing is a good example of the low priority people currently assign to higher education issues, as documented by several recent surveys. AUniversity of Connecticut survey found that 75% say that providing financial assistance for people who want to go to college is either extremely or very important.[9] But when people were asked by Princeton Survey Research Associates to rank the issues they consider priorities for the federal government, "ensuring that every American can afford to send their children to college" was near the bottom (see Table 21). Conserving resources, ensuring access to health care, taking care of the elderly, and ensuring high standards for K-12 schools were all of much greater concern to the public. Again, higher education is important to Americans. Its lower priority, we believe, is generated by the fact that people believe that other issues are more problematic and consequently require more urgent attention.

Table 21

As you know, there are many important issues facing our country, but we have only limited resources for addressing these issues. Keeping this in mind, how much of a priority should the federal government give to [INSERT ITEM]—a very high priority, a high priority but not the highest, a medium priority, or a low priority?

	Should give "very high" or "high" priority
Conserving the country's natural resources	77%
Ensuring every American access to affordable health care	75
Providing decent standard of living for the elderly	72
Setting academic standards for public schools	68
Reducing juvenile delinquency	60
Ensuring that food and medicines are safe	24
Ensuring that every American can afford to send their children to college	20
Reducing poverty	17

n = 1,762 general public, including an oversample of 200 African Americans. Results are weighted to be representative of the national adult population.

Source: Trust in Government Survey (Princeton Survey Research Associates, sponsored by Pew Research Center, 1998).

Afterword

Public Satisfaction, But for How Long?

When people think about a public service such as health care or education, their satisfaction tends to be affected by at least two factors: access and quality. If the system delivers quality service and if the people who need the service are able to get it, Americans tend to be satisfied and to turn their attention elsewhere. But when either quality or access is threatened, the public's attention can be quickly aroused and satisfaction can drop. Health care provides a useful example; this issue is intrinsically important to most people, but what catapulted it to the top of the public's list of concerns was a combination of threats to access and quality. During the recession years of the Bush administration, more and more people worried that they and Americans just like them might lose their access to health insurance coverage. At the same time, health care providers started to make changes in health care delivery—such as the implementation of managed care—that seemed to many people to lower the quality of their health care. Now there are just as many uninsured as ever, and those who have insurance are more likely to be frustrated in their interactions with health care providers. These changes in both quality and access have kept health care on the front burner in the public's attention.

For now, for most Americans, higher education is a public policy success story. It is not too difficult, however, to envision events that might cloud the

At the moment, the state of higher education is not troubling to the public. Our results show that, although people acknowledge that they don't know a great deal about higher education, from what they can see they judge the quality to be good. Students seem to be taking away valuable experiences and skills from their college years, and higher education also seems to be working well as a conduit to good jobs in today's booming economy. While prices may be high, the public believes that anyone who wants a college education can ultimately get one.

The Calm before the Storm?

For now, for most Americans, higher education is a public policy success story. It is not too difficult, however, to envision events that might cloud the public's current rosy outlook.

1. Problems with Affordability

If large numbers of American families begin to feel that they can no longer afford to send their youngsters to college, higher education might easily

become a "hot button" for the public. Tougher economic times that force colleges and universities to raise prices or reduce admissions could affect the public's view that anyone who really wants a college education can get one. What's more, tougher economic times might well increase families' anxiety about their ability to cover their share of college expenses, as well as the availability of jobs for themselves and their children just coming out of college. Graduates' willingness and ability to shoulder substantial loans could drop dramatically in a less hospitable job market. An economic downswing could upset the apple cart; cash-strapped Americans would likely greet any sign of diminishing access or rising costs with dismay. As we have seen, most Americans see higher education as the gateway to a good job and a middle-class lifestyle. If that gateway is threatened, we might expect to see considerable public distress.

2. Potential for Increased Frustration among Minorities

Problems with access and affordability could be especially divisive if they fell hardest on minority groups who are struggling to gain entry to higher education. As we have already seen, African American and Hispanic parents value higher education in even greater proportions than do white parents. There is, however, a large gap between the importance minority families place on higher education and the likelihood that their children actually attend and complete a college program. As a result, 63% of African American parents and 64% of Hispanic parents—compared with only 37% of white parents—believe there are many qualified people who do not have the opportunity to go to college.

The rising aspirations of these minority groups are closely intertwined with their hopes of educating the next generation. The Hispanic population in particular is one of the fastest growing segments of the population, especially in the number of young people.[10] If an economic downturn makes access to higher education more difficult for minority groups, then the dashed hopes that follow could be especially disheartening.

3. Beware of Scalebacks in Quality

Threats to the quality of higher education could also undermine public levels of satisfaction. As seen in Finding Two, the public holds higher education institutions to high expectations and standards. Higher education is one of the few issues of national importance where the public's high expectations and

their overall appraisal match so closely. However, those who struggle with the challenges of keeping costs down and enhancing efficiency in higher education will find themselves in a difficult position. They must take care to cut the fat and not the meat, keeping in mind that very little of what institutions now provide are viewed by the public as "frills."

There is... a large gap between the importance minority families place on higher education and the likelihood that their children actually attend and complete a college

The debate over distance learning offers a cautionary tale. Many college leaders and business executives see technologies such as distance learning as a way to increase the productivity of higher education. Although people are not well informed about new instructional technologies, our survey did find some initial acceptance of distance learning—a plurality (41%) of the public thinks that taking college classes over the Internet is a good idea for all types of students.[11] In focus groups, however, some people began to voice concerns that something essential would be lost if students spent a great deal of their time sitting in front of a monitor, instead of interacting with others in the real world. Upon consideration, participants in our focus groups became more resistant to this idea. They saw distance learning as helpful for busy adult learners, but they worried that students would lose out on face-to-face interactions, which they see as a necessary part of college learning. As they talk in focus groups, people hold close to an ideal higher education experience: the young person lives away from home, matures and has the kind of firsthand experiences that are traditionally associated with college. Fundamentally changing the mode of delivering higher education—in a way that impinges on this traditional model—could also trigger resentment in the public.

4. To Know Them Is Not Necessarily to Love Them

For now, people are generally satisfied with higher education while acknowledging they are not well informed about how it is run or financed. This is not unusual—the public knows very little about other complex policies, such as health care or Social Security. At this point, if the public were to know more about higher education, it's unclear whether this would increase, decrease or not affect their relatively high level of satisfaction. Greater familiarity might make the public more critical, like it has for leaders. On the other hand, greater familiarity may make people more accepting of change; an informed public could help the job of reformers proceed more smoothly. The key point for leaders to remember is that most people do not have the same grasp of the issues and the complexity of the system that they do. The public is currently not aware of the multiple challenges—financial and academic—facing various parts of the higher education system.

5. Disagreements among Leaders

Finally, our study reveals an uncomfortable, sometimes fractious, still emerging debate about higher education among leaders. If elected officials, college administrators and business leaders, working together, can find ways to preserve what people value in higher education—while keeping the costs to families and taxpayers at current levels—their disagreements may never enter the public's broad consciousness.

Most families now see some form of higher education for their own children as a necessity, and they strongly believe that any qualified, motivated student should have the chance to

But if leaders contemplate dramatic changes that violate the public's values—regarding either access or quality—they could trigger public frustration, unless they find ways to consider the public's concerns and priorities. Most families now see some form of higher education for their own children as a necessity, and they strongly believe that any qualified, motivated student should have the chance to attend. The public holds high expectations for college and believes that particular qualities should be protected. If leaders ask citizens to join with them in discussing ways to make this possible, Americans may respond with surprising realism and practicality. But Americans may not respond as well if leaders plan on delivering a fundamentally different higher education system to the public as a *fait accompli*—without the public's advice or consent and with precious little understanding of why change is needed at all. If that happens, they may awaken to find that this public policy success story has reached its end.

Deborah Wadsworth
President
Public Agenda

Supporting Tables

TABLE A

Satisfaction with High Schools and Colleges

Are the [INSERT ITEM] in your state doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?

% responding	*General Public*	*High School Parents*	*White High School Parents*	*African American High School Parents*	*Hispanic High School Parents*
Public High Schools					
Excellent	6	11	11	6	17
Good	27	41	40	34	27
Fair	28	30	30	37	30
Poor	13	12	12	12	12
Don't know	25	8	7	11	14
Colleges					
Excellent	15	19	19	14	16
Good	42	43	39	44	37
Fair	13	13	13	18	19
Poor	3	1	1	1	1
Don't know	28	26	28	22	28
Four-Year Colleges					
Excellent	15	20	19	17	18
Good	40	43	42	42	36
Fair	10	10	10	17	13
Poor	2	2	1	1	2
Don't know	33	26	29	23	30
Two-Year Colleges					
Excellent	14	20	17	16	17
Good	36	39	40	47	36
Fair	14	12	13	12	17
Poor	2	-	1	2	2
Don't know	34	29	31	22	29

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

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TABLE B

Attitudes Toward Higher Education

% responding	General Public	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so					
Strongly agree	78	80	82	78	76
Somewhat agree	15	15	13	14	15
Somewhat disagree	3	3	3	3	5
Strongly disagree	2	2	2	3	3
A college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be					
Strongly agree	68	66	62	76	71
Somewhat agree	19	24	25	13	18
Somewhat disagree	8	5	9	5	6
Strongly disagree	4	5	4	5	4
If someone really wants to go to college, they can find a way to pay for it, even if they have to go to school and work at the same time					
Strongly agree	63	59	59	66	63
Somewhat agree	24	28	27	21	23
Somewhat disagree	8	8	9	6	7
Strongly disagree	5	5	5	7	6
Today's colleges should be doing a much better job of keeping their costs down					
Strongly agree	60	62	64	71	67
Somewhat agree	23	20	20	20	17
Somewhat disagree	7	8	8	3	7
Strongly disagree	4	5	4	5	3
Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education					
Strongly agree	56	58	59	63	61
Somewhat agree	24	24	25	17	19
Somewhat disagree	11	11	10	11	9
Strongly disagree	4	3	2	4	7
Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs					
Strongly agree	47	44	47	48	49
Somewhat agree	27	32	27	18	25
Somewhat disagree	16	16	16	19	16
Strongly disagree	8	9	9	10	8
Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid					
Strongly agree	33	32	31	35	45
Somewhat agree	29	33	32	24	29
Somewhat disagree	17	17	17	15	9
Strongly disagree	15	15	13	22	15
There are too many students in college who don't belong there					
Strongly agree	27	19	19	22	22
Somewhat agree	22	27	28	13	21
Somewhat disagree	22	28	33	22	28
Strongly disagree	18	18	11	32	20
Most families today do a good job of saving for their children's college education					
Strongly agree	10	7	6	16	19
Somewhat agree	18	19	18	19	24
Somewhat disagree	33	39	41	23	20
Strongly disagree	32	34	33	38	34

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

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TABLE C

Parents Planning for Their Children's Higher Education

1. Importance of College

% responding	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
Which of the following do you think would be best for your own child after they finish high school?				
Get a job	4	4	2	6
Trade school	16	16	11	7
Two-year community college	22	24	23	20
Four-year college	55	54	60	65
When it comes to your own child, do you think a college education is something absolutely necessary to get, something helpful but not necessary, or not that important?				
Absolutely necessary	62	57	67	78
Helpful but not necessary	35	40	31	19
Not that important	3	4	1	2
How likely is it that your child will attend college after graduating high school?				
Certain	44	42	44	45
Very likely	31	31	30	26
Somewhat likely	15	18	20	21
Not too likely	10	10	4	5

2. Paying For Your Child's Higher Education

% responding	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
How worried are you about being able to pay for college expenses?				
Very worried	29	26	29	43
Somewhat worried	40	42	35	40
Not too worried	32	32	36	16
Do you think that you will find a way to work the costs out or do you seriously doubt that college will be affordable for your child?				
Will find a way to work out the costs	93	94	92	84
Seriously doubt that college will be affordable	5	4	7	13
Looking back, do you think you did the best you could to financially prepare for your child's college education or do you think you should have done more to prepare?				
Did the best	39	40	32	34
Should have done more	61	60	64	65

n = 178 parents of high school students; 179 white parents of high school students; 189 African American parents of high school students; 184 Hispanic parents of high school students

Base: Certain/very likely/somewhat likely that their child will attend college

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

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TABLE D

What Should a Student Gain from College?

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college? [INSERT ITEM] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential or not too important?

% responding	General Public	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own					
Absolutely essential	71	68	76	67	72
Important but not essential	26	30	23	30	26
Not too important	2	3	1	3	2
An ability to get along with people different from themselves					
Absolutely essential	68	66	70	67	67
Important but not essential	29	33	28	31	33
Not too important	2	2	2	2	1
An improved ability to solve problems and to think analytically					
Absolutely essential	63	66	69	63	62
Important but not essential	34	31	28	32	34
Not too important	1	3	3	5	3
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet					
Absolutely essential	61	66	67	65	71
Important but not essential	35	31	31	29	24
Not too important	4	4	3	5	5
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen					
Absolutely essential	60	60	60	59	63
Important but not essential	35	34	36	34	34
Not too important	4	5	3	5	2
Top-notch writing and speaking skills					
Absolutely essential	57	59	58	59	69
Important but not essential	38	39	38	36	30
Not too important	4	3	3	4	2
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering					
Absolutely essential	44	40	44	52	50
Important but not essential	47	56	49	40	44
Not too important	9	5	7	8	6
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history					
Absolutely essential	32	31	27	34	40
Important but not essential	53	57	59	53	49
Not too important	14	13	13	11	10

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% responding	*General Public*	*High School Parents*	*White High School Parents*	*African American High School Parents*	*Hispanic High School Parents*
Of all the ones you said are absolutely essential, which would you say is the most important of all? (Top four items listed)					
An ability to get along with people different from themselves	29	25	26	29	21
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen	17	20	21	14	14
An improved ability to solve problems and to think analytically	15	13	15	10	9
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own	14	15	18	17	19
Other selections*	25	26	21	30	38

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

*This category includes all other items in this battery, plus "don't know."

TABLE E

Expectations Toward Higher Education Institutions

How important are each of the following things for college administrators—the people running the schools—to focus on accomplishing? [INSERT ITEM] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important?

% responding	General Public	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
Control costs and spend money efficiently					
Absolutely essential	73	72	77	68	67
Important but not essential	24	24	20	28	31
Not too important	2	4	2	4	1
Attract the best possible teachers and researchers to their college					
Absolutely essential	70	69	73	71	69
Important but not essential	28	29	25	26	28
Not too important	2	2	2	3	3
Ensure students work hard to achieve high academic standards					
Absolutely essential	61	59	55	67	64
Important but not essential	32	36	40	30	35
Not too important	5	4	3	3	1
Keep the price of tuition from rising					
Absolutely essential	60	63	61	65	70
Important but not essential	35	32	35	31	28
Not too important	3	4	3	2	2
Provide extra help such as tutoring students who fall behind					
Absolutely essential	56	61	60	70	69
Important but not essential	37	37	35	29	30
Not too important	6	3	4	1	1
Make sure the personal behavior of students doesn't get too far out of line					
Absolutely essential	56	51	54	60	66
Important but not essential	35	39	35	34	31
Not too important	8	9	8	4	3
Find ways to help their local K-12 schools improve					
Absolutely essential	54	52	53	62	63
Important but not essential	36	37	36	33	34
Not too important	8	11	10	4	3
Provide career counseling and job placement					
Absolutely essential	54	57	58	63	62
Important but not essential	41	40	40	33	36
Not too important	5	3	2	2	3
Have a diverse student population					
Absolutely essential	39	37	29	59	47
Important but not essential	46	49	55	34	43
Not too important	14	14	14	6	10
Lower the number of students who drop out or who are taking too long to finish					
Absolutely essential	29	25	24	42	39
Important but not essential	44	46	51	38	46
Not too important	23	28	24	14	12
Support extra-curricular activities such as cultural events, sports and clubs					
Absolutely essential	21	23	23	32	31
Important but not essential	59	59	58	54	57
Not too important	20	19	18	12	12

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% responding	*General Public*	*High School Parents*	*White High School Parents*	*African American High School Parents*	*Hispanic High School Parents*
Of the ones you said were absolutely essential, which would you say is the most important of all? (Top four items listed)					
Attract the best possible teachers and researchers to their college	23	23	25	21	14
Ensure students work hard to achieve high academic standards	19	22	18	13	21
Control costs and spend money efficiently	10	10	12	10	6
Keep the price of tuition from rising	10	12	9	10	11
Other selections*	38	33	35	47	48

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories

* This category includes all other items in this battery, plus "don't know."

TABLE F

Opportunity and Higher Education

Do you think [INSERT ITEM] have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?

% responding	General Public	High School Parents	White High School Parents	African American High School Parents	Hispanic High School Parents
Qualified students from low-income families, regardless of their ethnic background					
Less opportunity	46	45	44	50	38
More opportunity	15	18	17	10	20
About the same opportunity	36	35	35	38	40
Qualified students from middle class families, regardless of their ethnic background					
Less opportunity	16	20	20	14	20
More opportunity	22	23	23	29	21
About the same opportunity	60	55	53	55	58
Qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities, such as blacks or Latinos					
Less opportunity	29	30	28	43	37
More opportunity	25	28	29	9	17
About the same opportunity	41	39	37	43	45
People who are older and are going back to school for retraining					
Less opportunity	37	42	44	39	38
More opportunity	15	15	13	16	14
About the same opportunity	42	40	36	40	45

n = 1,015 general public; 200 parents of high school students; 201 white parents of high school students; 202 African American parents of high school students; 202 Hispanic parents of high school students

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Endnotes

[1] Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1998. "Of the following qualities, which one or two do you think are the most important for success in the workplace today?" Being willing to work hard, 40%; Taking initiative and being creative, 32%; Getting along well with co-workers and having a good personality, 30%; Having computer skills and experience, 26%; Having a college degree, 21%; Telling your boss what he or she wants to hear, 2%; All of these (volunteer), 8%; Not sure, 1%. Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

[2] *Kids These Days '99* (Public Agenda, 1999), p. 7.

[3] Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, 1998. "Let me read you some areas people have given for federal government involvement and for each one please tell me, regardless of whether you favor or oppose the idea, if you think the federal government should play a very strong role in that area, somewhat strong role, not too strong of a role, or no role at all... Creating tax breaks to help parents pay for the cost of college education and post-high school training and related expenses in public education." Strong role, 61%; Somewhat strong role, 26%; Not strong role, 7%; No role at all, 6%.

[4] Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1997. "For each of the following federal government programs, I would like to know how much you personally support this as a good use of your tax dollars. Do you support the college student loan program a great deal, a fair amount, just a little, or not at all?" A great deal, 56%; Afair amount, 28%; Just a little, 8%; Not at all, 6%; Not sure, 2%.

[5] The 1993 survey asks about "public college and universities in your state." while the 1998 and 1999 surveys ask about "college and universities in your state." The 1999 survey provides "or don't you know enough to say" as an explicit answer choice, while the 1993 and 1998 surveys do not.

[6] *Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think about the Education Press* (Public Agenda, 1997). Public Agenda presentation document to the Education Writers Association, p. 35. "Where do you get the most useful information about what's happening in the schools in your community?" News on TV, radio or newspapers, 40%; Conversations with people you know, 33%; Your own experiences and observations, 22%.

[7] U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment of Persons 15 Years Old and Over, by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin*, March 1998.

[8] "Reality Check 2000," *Education Week*, vol. XVIII, No. 43, February 16, 2000.

[9] Center for Survey Research and Analysis, University of Connecticut, 1998. "I am going to read you a list of actions that the government might take to help workers or those looking for better jobs. For each one, please tell me whether you think that these actions are extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all... Provide financial assistance for people who want to go to college." Extremely important, 30%; Very important, 45%; Somewhat important, 18%; Not very important/not important at all, 6%; Don't know, 1%.

[10] U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Profile of the United States:* 1997, Series P23-194 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998), pp. 7, 44.

[11] "Today, it is possible for people to take college classes over the Internet. Do you think this is a good idea for anyone, for no one, only for recent high school graduates, or only for older people who want college credits?" For anyone, 41%; For no one, 24%; Only for recent high school graduates, 4%; Only for older people, 20%; Don't know, 9%.

Methodology

Great Expectations is based on a telephone survey of 1,015 adults aged 18 years or older. Interviews were also conducted with 202 African American, 202 Hispanic and 201 white parents of children in high school. The survey was complemented by eight focus groups conducted in sites across the country, as well as by consultation with several experts in the field of higher education policy.

The Telephone Survey

Atotal of 1,015 telephone interviews with adults aged 18 or older were conducted between December 2 and December 14, 1999. The interviews averaged 28 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households in the continental United States and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 1,015 randomly selected adults is +/–3 percentage points; the margin of error is higher in comparison of percentages across subgroups.

Telephone interviews also were conducted in December 1999 with 202 African American, 202 Hispanic and 201 white parents of children in high school. These groups were derived the following way: Respondents matching the demographic criteria (race/ethnicity and parental status) were culled from the national random sample and pooled with additional respondents, obtained through a targeted sampling method for African American and Hispanic parents and a random sample for white parents. The targeted samples included only those telephone exchanges in census tracts with at least a 30% density of households meeting the demographic criteria for African American and Hispanic. Of the 202 African American parents, 34 came from the national sample and 168 from the targeted sample; of the 202 Hispanic parents, 16 came from the national sample and 186 from the targeted sample; of the 201 white parents, 104 came from the national sample and 97 came from additional interviews. The margin of error for each of these groups of parents is +/–7 percentage points.

The survey also refers to "high school parents" as a subgroup within the general population. This group consists of 200 parents of high school students: 163 were culled from the national random sample and pooled with 37 additional respondents obtained from the sample of parents of white high school students. These 37 parents were added in order to make the "high school parents" sample racially representative of the nation.

The survey instrument was translated into Spanish and households identified as Spanish-speaking were interviewed by bilingual interviewers as needed. Atotal of 14 interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The survey was fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. Additional follow-up interviews were also conducted with some people who responded to the telephone survey.

Atotal of eight focus groups were conducted in six cities: Old Bridge, New Jersey; Santa Clara, California; Chicago, Illinois; El Paso, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

About the Author

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow at Public Agenda and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova University. He has written several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999); *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (1998); *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995); and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996) Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1996) and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

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98-1 *Concept Paper: ANational Center to Address Higher Education Policy,* by Patrick M. Callan (March 1998). Describes the purposes of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

98-2 *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998). Anational survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

98-3 *Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office,* by James B. Hunt Jr., Governor of North Carolina and Chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (June 1998). An address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

98-4 *Tidal Wave II Revisited: AReview of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California Higher Education,* by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998). Finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments were accurate.

98-5 *The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: AMemorandum to the Next Governor of California,* by David W. Breneman (September 1998). Concludes that the next governor should give serious consideration to exploring a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

98-6 *Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: AGuide for State Policy Makers,* by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998). Examines the implications of the new federal income tax provisions on students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

98-7 *Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences,* by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998). Describes the structural relationships that affect institutional efficacy in higher education, and argues that effective state policy achieves a balance between institutional and market forces.

98-8 *The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research,* by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness (December 1998). Argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

99-1 *Taking Responsibility: Leaders'Expectations of Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr (January 1999). Reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on a survey and focus groups conducted by Public Agenda.

99-2 *South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education,* by Mario Martinez (June 1999). Describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

99-3 *State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support,* by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

00-1 *AState-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus* (March 2000). The National Center is developing a state-by-state report card that compares and evaluates each state's performance in higher education. The goal of the report card is to stimulate the creation of state policies that enhance opportunity and achievement in higher education.

00-2 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for economic mobility; parents overwhelmingly believe that their children must go to college; and African American and Hispanic parents value higher education even more than white parents do. The report is based on the most extensive survey ever conducted on public views about higher education.

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